Refugees

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Cover: Georgians flee port city of Sukhumi during fighting with Abkhaz forces in October 1992. Photo: © K. Rissmann - Black Star.

AFTER THE SOVIET UNION!

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Population displacement in the former Soviet Union

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The collapse of the Soviet system was one of the most momentous events of the 20th century. It has not only altered the political geography of the world, but also created a host of new opportunities and challenges, both for the independent states and autonomous formations which have emerged, or re-emerged, from the Soviet empire, and also for the international community generally.

The post-Soviet landscape has yet to settle after this immense political earthquake, and there is still a great deal of tectonic movement. As the newly independent states seek to overcome the immense difficulties connected with state building, decolonization, economic dislocation and the transition to new political and economic systems, numerous ethnic conflicts and instances of extensive population displacement in various parts of this huge region at- ▶

▶ test to the continuing instability and dangerous potential for further upheaval and even greater crises.

Ethnic tensions and massive population movements are, however, not new to this part of the world. Indeed, more often than not, the roots of today's problems are to be found in the Soviet, and even tsarist, periods. Although the widespread misconception about the former Soviet Union as being synonymous with Russia tended to obscure the USSR's ethnic heterogeneity and the vitality of its non-Russian peoples, it was in fact the world's largest multinational state. Moreover, behind the facade of unity and the pretense that it was a harmonious new model society based on "free and equal partnership," the Soviet Union was also the last of the great empires and, for most of its history, a totalitarian one at that.

Territorially largely coterminous with the former Russian Empire, from which it was reconstituted by force, the Soviet empire spanned 11 time zones and stretched over 5,600 miles from the Baltic and Black Seas in the west to the Pacific Ocean in the east. The USSR also inherited a complex "nationalities problem" from the Tsarist Empire which existed on two planes: the vertical, involving the relationship between the majority, and politically and culturally dominant, Russian nation and the non-Russians, many of whom had attempted to establish their own independent states; and the horizontal, that is, the tensions and disputes between some of the non-Russian peoples living next to one another, which were frequently aggravated by Moscow's divide-and-rule policies.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks knew that force alone would not suffice to weld together the fragmented former Russian "prison of nations," and they initially offered some concessions to national feeling designed to win over the loyalties of the non-Russians. The USSR was organized territorially along ethnic lines right down to the regional and local levels. In Central Asia, new ethnic republics were created to break up the unity of Turkestan (as most of Muslim Central Asia was known after its conquest in the 19th century by Russia). Here, and in the Caucasus, internal borders were frequently arbitrarily imposed.

In the highly centralized, supposedly federal, Soviet Union, which was run by the ruling unitary Communist Party, 15 of the major nationalities had their own nominally sovereign Union republics. But there were dozens of other ethnic groups in this multi-ethnic patchwork, both large and very small, which had their own autonomous state formations.

But what really distinguished the USSR from other empires, was that, from Lenin until Gorbachev, Soviet rulers sought to reforge individuals, peoples and society in accordance with their all-embracing chiliastic ideology. Their policies, involving massive economic transformation and social and cultural "engineering," brought economic and social progress. But, because they were achieved through terror and coercion, the policies also resulted in immense suffering, the loss of untold millions of lives, and the forced displacement of people on a scale that is hard to imagine. Peasants were driven into collective farms, the better-off ones being deported with their families to remote regions; forced labor was used to meet the increasing demands for manpower from the industrialization and regional development programs, and an enormous complex of forced labor camps – the infamous GULAG – was established; entire ethnic groups were deported to Siberia and Central Asia.

During World War II there was further massive loss of life, destruction and population displacement. After the war, large-scale deportation was used to facilitate the Sovietization of the newly acquired territories in the Baltic region, Western Ukraine and Moldova, and Russians were encouraged to settle in these areas. After Stalin's death in 1953, the use of political terror and forced labor was drastically reduced, and many, but by no means all, of the peoples and individuals who had been repressed and forcibly displaced were gradually allowed to return home.

Through its control of the political and economic levers, the Soviet imperial center, however, continued to find ways of inducing mass population flows, usually of Russians (and Russified Ukrainians and Belarusians) to non-Russian republics, for the purposes of promoting regional development, as it saw fit, and strengthening central control. In 1954, for example, Khrushchev ignored the protests of Kazakh Communist officials and launched his "Virgin Lands Scheme" in which hundreds of thousands of "volunteers" were sent to settle and cultivate the supposedly "idle" areas of Kazakhstan, where in fact the Kazakhs had traditionally bred livestock. Consequently, by 1959, the Kazakh share of the population in their own republic had fallen to under a third.

The Kazakhs were not the only ones to fear about their future. The migration of Russians and other Slavs continued into the Central Asian, Caucasian and Baltic republics, especially into the cities. The relatively small Latvian and Estonian nations eventually became especially anxious about their survival. The heavy flow of Russians into Ukraine also did not abate and by 1989 there were over 11.3 million of them in this republic, constituting 22 percent of the total population.

The Soviet government's stimulation of migration flows in the name of economic and political exigencies reinforced ethnic tensions in the republics. As it was, the leading role of the Russians and of their language and culture had been officially promoted from the Stalin period onwards, and the main thrust of Soviet nationalities policy in the post-Stalin period was to forge a "Soviet people" with a Russian cultural core. In this sense, the Russians, who themselves suffered considerably during the Soviet period, were a privileged people. While the non-Russians were pressured to learn and use Russian, very few of the Russian, or Russian-speaking migrants, bothered to learn ▶

▶ the languages of non-Russian nationalities, even if they lived among them.

When, in the Brezhnev period, the Soviet command economy began to show increasing signs of stagnation, changes in demographic trends also added to the Soviet leadership's sense of impending crisis. The birthrate of the Russians and other Slavs was declining, while that of the unassimilable Central Asian peoples remained high, giving rise to psychological and political fears, and complicating matters for Soviet central planners and the generals. Furthermore, as the traditionally Muslim Central Asia peoples began to reap the benefits of modernization policies and of affirmative action programs, they grew more assertive, and Russian and other migrants began to leave. In 1979, Soviet concern about the "Muslim" demographic time bomb, the possible spread of Islamic fundamentalism and the security of the USSR's southern borders, were factors behind the decision to invade Afghanistan.

During the next decade, there was a complete reversal of the North-South migration pattern – that is of Slavic migrants moving to the Central Asian republics and the Caucasus – and hundreds of thousands of persons left Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and other southern republics.

The scale and acuteness of the "nationalities question," which had long been officially proclaimed as "solved," became apparent almost as soon as Gorbachev embarked on his course of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Designed to revamp and not dismantle the Soviet system, these policies nevertheless led away from totalitarianism and empire. With the relaxation of controls, problems which had been suppressed or concealed suddenly came to the fore.

The first major tremor was felt in December 1986 when Kazakhs rioted after Moscow appointed a Russian as the new Party boss in Kazakhstan. During the early phase of *glasnost*, however, the only major displacement of population was caused in April 1986 by the world's worst nuclear accident at the Chernobyl atomic power station north of the Ukrainian capital, Kiev. But within two years, the ethnic conflicts that were accumulating as a result of the Soviet leadership's continuing reluctance to address the nationalities problem began producing hemorrhaging of refugees and displaced persons.

In early 1988, the long smoldering problem of Nagorno-Karabakh, (the predominantly Armenian enclave which Moscow had placed under Azerbaijan's jurisdiction in the 1920s) suddenly flared up. As a result of the ethnic strife an estimated 500,000 Armenians and Azerbaijanis fled in opposite directions, from Azerbaijan to Armenia, and vice versa. The following summer, communal violence erupted in the Fergana Valley in Central Asia and over 60,000 Meskhetian Turks – one of the deported peoples – were driven out of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Far from eradicating national consciousness, Soviet policies had the opposite effect. National feeling and assertiveness were on the rise.

As the center began to lose control, the daunting scale of the difficulties facing the Soviet leadership in trying to hold its crumbling empire together was also revealed in the last Soviet census, which was carried out in 1989. It emerged that the Russians now barely accounted for 50 percent of the population of 285 million. Far from eradicating national consciousness, Soviet policies had in fact had the opposite effect: the entire trend continued to be in the direction of the concentration of most nationalities in their own areas and their greater assertiveness. National feeling and assertiveness were on the rise throughout the USSR, and the non-Russians from Moldova and the Baltic republics to Central Asia were beginning to pass laws aimed at upgrading and bolstering the status of their native languages – in other words, counteracting the effects of Russification.

The census also exposed the extent of the displacement and intermixing of peoples that had taken place and how huge was the number of people who now risked being considered aliens, or even colonizers, in others' homelands. About one-fifth of the Soviet population – between 54 million and 65 million people, depending on what definition of a homeland was used – lived outside their national units. Of these, 25.3 million were Russians, who were also the only group to enjoy cultural facilities in their own language outside their own republic and who could, until then, at least, feel at home in any part of the Soviet Union.

Impatient with the Kremlin, the non-Russians raised the standards of national self-determination and sovereignty and sought to build, or renew, their own independent states. The Russians themselves were gradually affected by the virus of largely democratic nationalism. With Boris Yeltsin and other reformist leaders taking up the cause of affirming Russia's sovereignty, the imperial center split and lost its resolve. After a botched attempted putsch in August 1991 by Communist Party diehards who wanted to preserve the old order, the compromise solution of a loose non-state voluntary association, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), to replace the USSR, was finally forced on Gorbachev and the reluctant center in December 1991 by the joint action of the leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.

Because the collapse of the Soviet Union took the form – on the whole – of a remarkably peaceful and orderly process of dissolution, and was generally greeted with hope in the newly independent states, including Russia, as the beginning of a new age, there was no flood of refugees to the outside world.

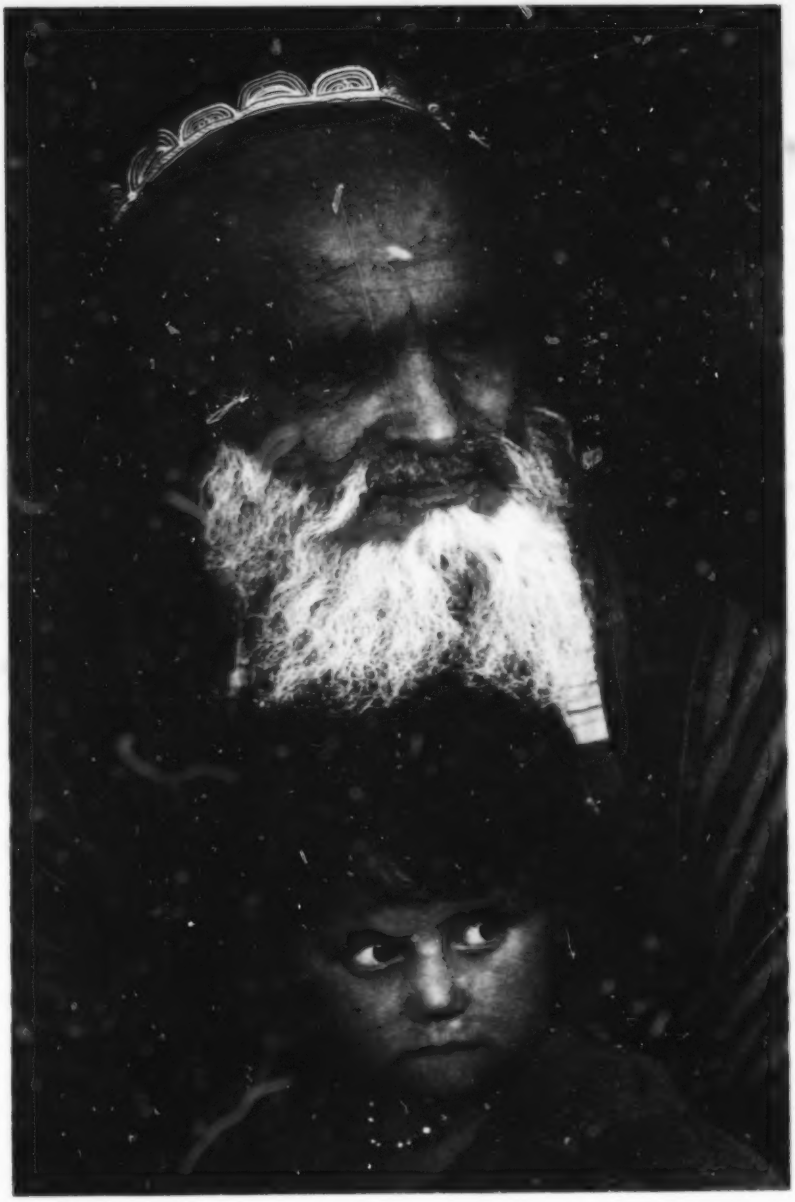
All too soon, though, it became apparent how difficult it was to over-

come the legacy of 70 years of Soviet rule and that democratic and economic transformation was going to be a highly complex and painful process that could not be rushed. The newly independent states also began to act as sovereign entities, seeking to reaffirm the national identity of the titular nation, to safeguard their territorial integrity and, in some cases, to change existing borders.

Because many of the borders had been arbitrarily demarcated in the past and populations had been intermixed, this has frequently spelled trouble. Apart from the obvious case of Armenia's unresolved dispute with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, which soon developed into open war between the two states, there are other examples of friction and conflict. In fact, the first outbreak of ethnic violence on the territory of the Russian Federation itself occurred in late October 1992 in the North Caucasus when tens of thousands of Ingush were driven out of the disputed Prigorodny district in North Ossetia by Ossetians. Prior to their deportation in 1944, the area had belonged to the Ingush.

Elsewhere, relations between Russia and Ukraine have been strained by, among other issues, the future of the Crimean peninsula and the former Soviet Black Sea Fleet based there. The Crimean Tatars had been deported from Crimea in 1944, and Russian settlers had moved in; yet, in 1954 the peninsula, with its Ukrainian minority, was transferred from the Russian Federation to Ukraine by Khrushchev. Among other examples of border disputes are those between Estonia and Russia, Lithuania and Belarus, Russia and Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

All of the independent countries which emerged as a result of the disintegration of the USSR, including Russia, are to a greater or lesser extent themselves multi-ethnic states and now have to deal with integrating national minorities and reducing centrifugal tendencies.



Tajik returnees from Afghanistan.

In Estonia and Latvia, citizenship and other laws have been passed which are implicitly aimed at halting immigration into these states and encouraging the "repatriation" of Russians. Because the laws in effect temporarily disenfranchise much of the non-indigenous population, they have been condemned as discriminatory by the Slavic minorities and Russia, which has assumed the role of a vocal protector of the rights of Russians and Russian-speakers now suddenly living "abroad." In Ukraine, however, where the bulk of the Russians living outside of Russia are settled, analogous laws have been carefully crafted to integrate, and not alienate, the national minorities. Kiev is asking for similar treatment for several million Ukrainians living in Russia and other newly independent states.

In Georgia and in Moldova, problems over the rights of national minorities have led to armed conflicts and large-scale population displacement. In 1991, fighting broke out between the Georgians and the Ossetian minority, and the following year, between the Georgians and the Abkhaz. In Moldova, armed conflict erupted in 1992 after the Russian-dominated Transdniester enclave (whose leaders had been opposed to the dissolution of the USSR) sought to break away. ▶

One of the most serious conflicts since the collapse of the Soviet Union has been in Tajikistan, where in 1992 a civil war broke out. Hundreds of thousands of Tajik refugees fled to Afghanistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Because of the intermixture of ethnic groups (for instance, neighboring Uzbekistan, the most populous of the Central Asian states, has 950,000 Tajiks and 850,000 Kazakhs, while about 2.5 million Uzbeks live outside of Uzbekistan, half of them in Tajikistan), Tajikistan's porous border with Afghanistan, and the fear of the spread of Islamic fundamentalism, the conflict in Tajikistan has major implications for the entire sub-region.

Hardly surprisingly, since the collapse of the USSR, the spontaneous outflow of Russians and Russian-speakers to Russia from the former Soviet republics which have now become "foreign countries," has greatly intensified. It is estimated that since 1989 over 2 million people have moved to Russia for a variety of reasons: to escape conflict, because they perceive themselves as victims of actual or potential persecution or discrimination – the Russian authorities have designated these two categories of displaced Russian-speakers as "forced migrants" – or for economic motives.

Roughly a quarter of the people who have moved to Russia since 1989 have been recognized as either refugees or forced migrants, the largest percentage coming from Tajikistan (over 25 percent), Georgia (19 percent), Azerbaijan (16 percent) and other Central Asian states, with a relatively low percentage of about 1.5 percent coming from Latvia and Estonia. The North Caucasian republic of Chechnya, which has attempted to break away from Russia, and the conflict between the Ingush and Ossetians have also produced tens of thousands of internally displaced and "forced migrants."

This, in addition to the problems of accommodating the tens of thousands of former Soviet military personnel withdrawn from Central and Eastern Europe and the newly independent states, as well as the movement of internal economic migrants away from remote former secret military production sites and artificial cities located in inhospitable regions in the North, Siberia and the Far East, has placed an enormous strain on the Russian Federation and is exacerbating social tensions.

The exodus of the Russian-speaking population from Central Asia is also hurting local economies and social services because it is depriving the sub-region of skilled personnel with badly needed professional and industrial skills, such as doctors, teachers and engineers. In several of the Central Asian states, the problem has become so serious that efforts have been made by the authorities to reassure the Slavic population in order to stem the outflow.

All of the newly independent states have been faced with the acute and growing problems of asylum-seekers.

All of the newly independent states have also been faced with the acute and growing problems of asylum-seekers and illegal and transit migrants from outside the former Soviet region. None of them have the resources and institutional capacity to deal effectively with the problems associated with population movements, and some Russian authorities have even begun arguing that the Russian Federation is unable to fulfil the obligations it undertook when, in 1992, it acceded to the 1951 Convention on refugees.

In 1994, UNHCR knew of over 60,000 people in Russia from outside the CIS and Baltic states who were claiming to be refugees. Almost half of them came from Afghanistan, the other large groups being from Somalia, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Angola, China, Ethiopia and Zaire. The number of illegal migrants, many of them in transit westward, is believed to be considerably higher, perhaps as much as half a million. An estimated 150,000 Chinese alone are believed to have entered Russia illegally.

The complex refugee and displacement problems on the territory of the former Soviet Union have led UNHCR and other U.N. agencies and international humanitarian organizations to become involved in a part of the world where until recently they had been absent. Since 1991, UNHCR has established a presence in Moscow and several other countries of the CIS and has been active in addressing refugee-related problems. In Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Tajikistan it has provided humanitarian assistance and protection to tens of thousands of the displaced and endeavored to promote repatriation under conditions of security and safety. Through advice, training and technical assistance, UNHCR has also helped the newly independent countries in the region begin building an institutional capacity to deal with refugees and migrants.

Clearly, this is only a start and much more needs to be done in a more imaginative, concerted and comprehensive manner to deal effectively with existing and potential problems associated with the large-scale displacement of people. Today, the entire post-Soviet set-up is still latently unstable. There is no shortage of existing conflicts and flashpoints. Much will depend on Russia – the major regional power, whose forces are already playing a role in Tajikistan and Georgia – and on the direction in which it will develop. But much could also depend on whether the international community and the United Nations system recognize the challenges, dangers and opportunities which this volatile region presents and take timely, broad-ranging preventive action to help stabilize conditions, manage conflict, and thereby reduce the risks of future extensive internal and external displacement.

Bohdan Nahaylo
UNHCR senior adviser on the CIS & Baltic states

Meeting the challenge

Following are excerpts from an October 4 address by Russian Deputy Foreign Minister S. Krylov at UNHCR's Executive Committee meeting in Geneva:

In every region of the world, the deep-rooted causes of humanitarian catastrophes are identical: social and economic instability; a rise in aggressive nationalism and xenophobia; ethnic, clan and religious intolerance; and disregard for basic human rights. For Russia and other countries within the post-Soviet space these are not abstract notions but the day-to-day reality of societies painfully parting with a totalitarian past.

The peculiarity of Russia's situation is that humanitarian problems remain unabated despite democratic reforms. The magnitude and novelty of the problems we face overshadow the means at our disposal. Several zones of instability and regional conflicts – primarily in the Caucasus and Central Asia – are Russia's immediate neighbors. Flows of refugees and forced migrants from these regions into Russia are growing. Today, they account for nearly 2 million persons.

The ever-growing number of ethnic Russians who wish to settle in Russia is of special concern. From relatively safe Uzbekistan alone, the number of such persons grew eightfold between January and August 1994.

Russia also faces a constantly growing flow of refugees from Asia and Africa. It is no revelation that the majority of these persons regard Russia as only temporary shelter on the way to Western Europe and America. But unsettled nationality issues, porous borders and tougher entry requirements in traditional asylum countries means there is a growing danger that they will settle down in Russia – creating a kind of "reservation" for illegal immigrants.

We are firmly convinced that all these problems should be solved primarily by ourselves. This is not only our moral duty, but an obligation under a variety of international instruments to which Russia is a party.

We have achieved some progress in meeting the requirements of the 1951 Convention on the status of refugees. A federal migration program has recently been approved, for example, and a number of regulations adopted on migration control, status determination and other refugee- and migrant-related issues. The Federal Migration Service of Russia, established in 1992, is expanding its activities, with offices in many regions of the country working to international standards.

There has also been progress in relations with our partners in the Commonwealth of Independent States. An agreement on assistance to refugees and forced migrants has been signed and a draft convention on the rights of ethnic minorities has been developed. Russia is doing a great deal to stabilize the economic and political situation in CIS countries. This is probably the most effective way to reduce outflows of refugees and migrants.

We know we have made some mistakes in this new endeavor. Some of them are caused by inexperience; others, unfortunately, by the unwillingness of some officials to act in accordance with rules of law and human morals. Despite such problems we will continue to strive to fulfill our obligations.

We appreciate the moral and material support we receive from international organizations, prime among them UNHCR. Experience of joint work – such as the implementation of the Quadripartite Agreement on Voluntary Return of Refugees and Displaced Persons to Abkhazia – has been very valuable. We will draw on the lessons learned in our next task: preparing adequate conditions for the return of refugees from North Ossetia and Tajikistan.

Russia should never be allowed to become a source of instability – a country producing uncontrollable flows of aggressively minded refugees. To prevent that, we need broader cooperation with UNHCR and other international organizations such as UNDP. The regions of Russia that accept refugees should be priority recipients of technical and other assistance provided by the UNHCR and other international organizations. Russian experts who work with refugees should receive broader training.

We in Russia have been working to prepare an international conference on refugees. We have also prepared a draft national report and have established a legal basis for defining refugee status. We have improved coordination between agencies dealing with refugee problems. Our consultations with numerous states have confirmed their interest in the above-mentioned conference. This is an encouraging sign demonstrating that the international community does not intend to distance itself from the problems in the post-Soviet space.

Despite its many complex problems Russia also participates in the UNHCR-organized operation in Yugoslavia and has already provided $500,000 in aid to Rwanda. We are ready to take part in UNHCR operations in several countries of the former USSR, particularly in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

High Commissioner Sadako Ogata has said that "by protecting individuals, we reduce tensions in society and enhance global human security". We agree. The protection of individuals is the only way to lay down a solid basis for the sustained and progressive development of mankind. In the next century, meeting the real rights and needs of persons will be a genuine criterion of the progress of our civilization. ■

Meal time at the Tchekova accommodation center outside Moscow.

Chilly reception for refugees in Russia

Russia is a country unused to refugees. For most of its history, Russia's borders have been closed both to people trying to get in and to people trying to get out. But the collapse of the Soviet Union changed that and opened Russia to the outside world – and the outside world came to Russia.

In the past, the Soviet Union accepted very few refugees, mostly revolutionaries and communists fleeing persecution. But now more than a million refugees and migrants have flooded into Russia from the republics of the former Soviet Union. Tens of thousands more have come from places as far-flung as Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Somalia, hoping for asylum and using Russia as a stepping stone to Western Europe.

According to the Federal Migration Service (FMS), the arm of the Russian government dealing with migrants, there are about 500,000 officially registered migrants and refugees from the former USSR in Russia, and as many as 2 million who have not been registered. In comparison, UNHCR has registered more than 60,000 foreigners from outside the former Soviet Union.

The problem could get much worse. There are about 25 million ethnic Russians living outside Russia. The FMS estimates that 2-3 million of them will return in the next two years.

Russia, caught unprepared for the huge flows of people across its borders, rushed to establish laws and institutions to deal with them. Following adoption by the Russian Parliament, the 1951 U.N. Convention on refugees and the 1967 Protocol entered into force in early 1993. With it, Moscow hoped that Russia would get help for the huge masses of returning Russians.

"We signed so that the international community would actively help with refugees – but international help has been very weak," said Vyacheslav Bakhmin, head of the Foreign Ministry's Directorate of International Humanitarian and Cultural Cooperation and a supporter of the signing of the Convention. "Our position is that the Russian refugees in Russia are refugees in the international sense, and we want the same kind of help that other states get."

"The Convention does not answer Russia's needs and the Foreign Ministry miscalculated when they

signed it," said Yuri Arkhipov, the outspoken head of the external migration department of the FMS and a fierce opponent of the Convention and of Russia accepting refugees. Arkhipov has blamed the Convention for turning Russia into a "holding pen" for refugees from around the world who enter Russia illegally, "spread disease" and who hope in vain to get to the West.

Juan Amunategui, UNHCR's Regional Representative in Moscow, refuted criticism that UNHCR focuses almost exclusively on refugees from outside the Baltics and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). He said a large part of the problem was that Russia still had no system of refugee determination to regularize the status of genuine refugees. Once a system is in place, UNHCR plans to make an international appeal for $27.5 million to assist non-CIS refugees, CIS refugees and returning Russians. But even with the appeal, UNHCR will be hard-pressed to help. UNHCR Moscow is spending $6 million in 1994 to help only 7,000 people.

"It is unfair to say that we are assisting only non-CIS asylum-seekers," said Amunategui, who is also the U.N.'s Regional Representative. He said UNHCR is running a joint program with the FMS to help forced migrants in the southern Russian region of Krasnodar. He also noted that it was very difficult to get accurate information on the numbers and needs of these people from the Russian authorities.

Russia's lack of money and experience in dealing with refugees has caused huge problems for all types of migrants arriving in the country. But the experiences of CIS and non-CIS refugees are wildly different, reflecting Russia's traditional suspicion of foreigners.

"Some officials in the FMS would like the problem to disappear and to deport all the foreign refugees. It is a reflection of the old isolationist viewpoint," said Bakhmin.

The Russian diaspora has received attention from Russian politicians ranging from President Boris Yeltsin to Vladimir Zhirinovsky. Many of the Russians come from areas devastated by wars and where the local population is often resentful of ethnic Russians. People leaving areas like war-torn Tajikistan often abandon apartments and possessions and arrive in Russia with nothing. In places that are a little calmer, the head of the family often goes to Russia to try to find a place to live and work before importing the family to Russia.

"It is very difficult in Russia," said Vassily Yevtakinov, the head of a committee of Russians from Armenia. "Everybody has to make do on their own because the FMS does not really have the resources to help. People have to rely on their friends and family."

According to Yevtakinov, many regions are unwilling to accept returning Russians because they are a burden on local budgets and because they compete for already scarce jobs.

But whatever their material problems, returning Russians speak the language, look the same as everybody else and are citizens of the country. For asylum-seekers from outside the CIS, the difficulties are much more severe.

Many of them came to Russia illegally or with tourist visas from Russian consulates abroad, hoping to get ferried to Western Europe by criminal gangs who make a handsome profit smuggling people across borders. But once in Moscow, they are stranded with no hope of moving on to Europe and have no desire or possibility of returning home.

Despite signing the 1951 Convention and passing its own laws on refugees, Russia has done almost nothing to process the claims of asylum ▶

Afghan and Iraqi refugee children in a kindergarten at the Zelenogradsky accommodation center outside Moscow.

seekers. People have been unable to claim refugee status and so are considered illegal aliens by the Russian authorities. Without official papers, they have no right to housing, their children are unable to go to school, they cannot work or get medical care. UNHCR has stepped into the breach and is issuing identity cards to asylum-seekers, but the Russian police refuse to recognize UNHCR's authority to issue such papers.

A new law on dealing with asylum-seekers was published in September. It promises to issue temporary residence permits to asylum-seekers and to decide their cases within three months. But by late October, nobody had been processed.

"People wanted to see if it was possible to live in Russia," said Abu Asil, the Iraqi community representative on a UNHCR-supported refugee committee. "But after people saw how difficult and dangerous it is here, they all want to go to Europe."

Stuck in Russia with no recognized papers and no work, refugees have become targets for the police, who frequently arrest, harass and extort money from them. According to figures from the UNHCR reception center in Moscow, 400 incidents of police harassment were reported in the first six months of 1994. More than half of them were against Somalis and Angolans, despite the fact that they make up only 13 percent of non-CIS refugees in Russia. The darker the skin color and the more the person stands out, the more police attention they receive. Afghan and Iraqi refugees are also targeted because they resemble the black-haired peoples of the Caucasus, whom the police accuse of bringing crime to Russia.

"As soon as the police see your black hair, they think you are a bandit or a drug dealer," said Sharif, a 32-year-old refugee from Afghanistan.

In an example of what can happen with no legal protection, 21 Afghan refugees were forcibly deported back to Afghanistan from the Krasnodar region of southern Russia in early August. The FMS said that the deportations were legal because the Afghans had not applied for refugee status. But UNHCR workers who travelled to Krasnodar were told that the regional government refuses to accept applications for refugee status.

The experiences of CIS and non-CIS refugees are wildly different, reflecting Russia's traditional suspicion of foreigners.

The deportation brought a strong protest from UNHCR headquarters in Geneva, which complained to the Russian government that the deportations were contrary to the 1951 Convention. The protest note added that UNHCR "sees this incident in the wider context of the generally deteriorating protection situation of asylum-seekers and refugees in the territory of the Russian Federation."

"Those Afghans were in Russia illegally," said Arkhipov of the FMS. "Besides, we don't have a communist government here anymore, so why should we accept these refugees who supported communism in their own country?"

The number of refugees coming to Russia from outside the former USSR has dropped as word has spread about the unfriendly reception and poor living conditions. Those who remain are only a small fraction of Russia's overall refugee problem. But after waiting in limbo, often for years, they need a solution that will allow them to get on with their lives. And that still leaves the almost insurmountable problem of dealing with the ex-Soviet migrants.

"It is a strategic mistake on the part of international organizations to deal only with non-CIS refugees," warned Bakhmin of the Foreign Ministry. "If the Russian refugee problem is not dealt with, it could act as a detonator for an explosion in Russian politics."

JAN CIESKI

International conference to examine regional refugee issues

UNHCR is working on plans for a proposed international conference next year focusing on refugees and forced displacement in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Baltic states.

The conference idea is part of an initiative aimed at developing a comprehensive approach toward the region's present and future refugee and migratory problems.

John Horekens, director of UNHCR's Regional Bureau for Europe, says the international community is beginning to recognize the need for preventive action as well as for solutions to the existing problems of displacement throughout the region. "An international conference is part of such a process, which focuses on the regional dimensions of the problems," he said.

"The international community and international agencies such as UNHCR are faced with the dual pressure of dealing with the situation once a crisis has occurred while at the same time engaging in preventive actions aimed at avoiding large-scale disruption," said a recent UNHCR report on the former Soviet Union. "Prevention holds the greatest long-term dividends, although the short-term investment in both time and resources may be high."

A majority of governments, international and non-governmental organizations and other U.N. agencies contacted so far by UNHCR have expressed support for the regional conference concept focusing on the CIS and Baltic states.

UNHCR expects to work closely with the International Organization for Migration on plans for the proposed conference, which could be held in late 1995. A preparatory conference is being considered for early 1995, to be followed by a series of sub-regional and technical meetings.

Russians outside Russia:

Hostages of the empire

The presence of important Russian communities in the Commonwealth of Independent States and Baltic countries constitutes perhaps the most complex legacy of the Soviet era. Several factors make this issue the linchpin of the post-Soviet landscape, including:

- the sheer size of these communities (around 25 million people, or 17.4 percent of all Russians in 1989);
- the significant role they play in the social and economic life of these states;
- the geopolitical importance of the so-called "near abroad" for Russia;
- the geopolitical importance of Russia for the states of the region.

In the aftermath of the Soviet break-up, the "Russian minority question" has come to play a central role in the process of redefinition by the CIS and Baltic states of their respective roles and interests in the region.

They have been called "hostages of the empire" – people whose destiny happened to cross that of a huge multinational state in disintegration. Indeed, whether these Russian communities will remain in or leave their current homes, and whether they will stay on as an integrated ethnic group or as an alienated minority, will depend less on their own behavior than on that of the major actors – Russia and the republics.

Conversely, the attitudes of these states towards the Russian communities living outside of Russia will constitute a valuable indicator of where these states want to go, and what they want to become. Will Russia become an aggressive regional power with neo-imperial ambitions, or a democratic one, keen on dialogue with its neighbours? Will the CIS and Baltic states become self-centered, mono-ethnic entities, or democratic, pluralist and tolerant societies? The answers to such crucial questions will be found in these states' policies concerning the Russian minority.

Between 1950 and 1970, millions of Slavs – and particularly Russians – settled in what were then the Soviet republics in search of better pay, decent housing and rewarding jobs. As a result of these unprecedented migratory flows, by the late 1980s Russians constituted the largest ethnic minority in almost all of the republics. In 1989, their share of the total population of the republics oscillated between 1.6 percent in Armenia and 37.8 percent in Kazakhstan.

A highly transient population, the Russian migrants were a typical product of the Soviet regime. Living in Tallinn or Tashkent did not make any difference to them, for they considered all of the republics as an integral part of the same country, the USSR. In moving, they might sacrifice stability for higher social status. After a while, they would move again, responding to the government's or the *Komsomol's* appeal to toil the virgin lands of Central Asia. And they would retire in the Baltic region, where life was almost as good as in Europe. They truly were the new Soviet people.

For these migrants, the break-up of the Soviet Union constituted a profound trauma. Suddenly, they found themselves living in a foreign land: *"okazalis' v emigratsii"* ("We found ourselves in the emigration"). What was their own homeland, there? Certainly not the village in Central Russia they had left years ago. Home was the USSR, which unfortunately for them no longer existed. As one of them put it: "Overnight, we became refugees. We didn't leave our country; it was our country that abandoned us."

Only by looking at the Russian immigrants as "true Soviet nomads," rather than as ethnic Russians, can one understand their behavior in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Most striking after the unsuccessful attempted coup by communist hardliners and the disintegration of the USSR in 1991 is their passivity, coupled with a kind of stupor. The Russians had great difficulty in accepting the disappearance of their homeland and in adapting to the new realities. This should not come as a surprise, given the great extent to which the indigenous populations themselves were disoriented by these events. Still today, many millions of Russians living in the CIS and Baltic states are unable to face the epochal changes that have taken place around them, much less reckon with the consequences of such changes.

> "We didn't leave our country; our country abandoned us."

The first major direct effect on Russians living in the republics has been the steady and rapid loss of their privileged position in local society. Says a Moscow sociologist: "The tragedy of the Russians in the republics is that, having got used to a comfortable status, they are now in a state of political apathy, they reject the new reality, do not fight for power and boycott elections."

Editor's note: The views expressed in this article are the author's and do not necessarily reflect those of the IOM. For the sake of simplicity, the countries of the CIS – except for Russia – and the Baltic states are referred to as "the republics."

The worsening of the Russians' once privileged social position is most bitterly felt, and indeed resented, in the Central Asian republics, where the difference in social level between the indigenous population and the Slavs was greatest. Although the prospect of a privileged social position was one of the attractions that drew Russians to the republics in the first place, the loss of this status does not necessarily mean that they will now leave *en masse*. Loss of status is a necessary condition for their departure, but not a sufficient one.

The second consequence of the 1991 events is that the Russians living in the republics are alone. Moscow no longer has the means to protect them, as it could during the Soviet era. Even worse, Moscow's interests and priorities do not always seem to coincide with those of the Russians living in the republics. This has particularly angered the latter, who have felt both betrayed and manipulated.

The Russians' growing solitude has gone through several stages. Immediately after the August 1991 attempted coup, Russia wilfully initiated a policy of disengagement from the political struggles of the independent republics, thus conveying the impression of abandoning the local Russians to their fate. At that time, the general feeling within Moscow's democratic circles, which had enthusiastically supported the independence movements in the republics, was that the Russians living in the republics were mostly hard-line communists who did not deserve their support.

In spring 1992, however, the Russian minority question began to play an increasingly important role both on Russia's domestic political scene and in its relationship with the "near abroad." The spark was the re-enactment of the Estonian citizenship law, which did not grant automatic citizenship to Russians permanently living in Estonia.

Since then, the Russian minority question has become a handy political tool for both ends of the political spectrum. On the one hand, the political debate has been successfully manipulated by chauvinist movements, which have accused the democratic government in Moscow of being excessively complacent with the republican authorities. The nationalists were and still are exploiting the issue to goad Russia into a greater involvement in the internal affairs of the republics.

On the other hand, the Russian democrats have felt betrayed by the authorities in the republics, particularly the Baltic states, whom they saw as turning against the local Russian population in order to consolidate their newly acquired power.

The Russian minority question has become the linchpin of Russia's foreign policy in the "near abroad." The debate was initially dominated by the contrasting approaches of then Vice President Rutskoi, who favored the use of force in defense of Russian minorities, and Foreign Minister Kozyrev, partisan of a moderate approach. Very soon, however, the radicalization of the political atmosphere in Russia, spearheaded by the Supreme Soviet, led Kozyrev to adopt a more aggressive stance.

In early 1993, Kozyrev's and the Parliament's foreign policy positions began drawing closer. At the same time, the Ministry of Defense came to the forefront, calling for a more confrontational approach. Today, the differences between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense are skillfully played out to maximum advantage in what can be described as a "good guy/bad guy" strategy.

For the past two years, Russia has repeatedly accused the Baltic states of "gross violations of human rights," and some Central Asian ones of "Islamic fundamentalism." The predictable outcome of such an approach – a net increase in tensions between Russia and the republics – was clearly a liability for the Russians living in the republics. In fact, many of them have repeatedly expressed the wish that Russia conduct a less confrontational diplomacy on their behalf.

Moscow's aggressive foreign policy on the Russian minority question has led some observers to argue that Russia's priority appears to be less that of defending the rights and well-being of Russians in the republics, than that of pursuing other, more important foreign policy objectives.

The third major consequence of the 1991 events is that, in some republics, Russians no longer feel at home. While this growing feeling of alienation may be due to governmental policy, a more or less spontaneous popular mood or exaggerated fears, there is no denying that Russians in the republics are feeling increasingly insecure and uncertain about their future. In Estonia and Latvia, this feeling has been reinforced by a clearly identifiable governmental line aimed at delaying or even hindering the acquisition by Russians of some form of legal status, with the not-so-hidden purpose of encouraging their departure from the country. This policy has indeed produced a feeling of insecurity in the Russian-speaking population and has reinforced their mistrust of local authorities. Despite this, it is clear that most Slavs have no intention of leaving the Baltic states, at least in the near future. In the final analysis, it appears that the policies of the Estonian and Latvian leaderships have created a climate of mistrust that is more detrimental to their own countries than to the Russian population itself.

What is the future of the Russian communities living in the republics?

The Russian minority question has become the linchpin of Russia's foreign policy in the "near abroad."

Ethnic Russians line up at a border crossing as they return to Estonia after visiting Russia.

What options are available to them? The most discussed one is out-migration. This is called "repatriation" by Baltic officials – who stress the ethnic link between the immigrants and Russia – and "forced migration" by Russian authorities, who underscore the involuntary and even forcible nature of the outflow. Out-migration is favored by the Baltic governments and by some groups of Russians, while the Central Asian governments, having realized its disruptive impact on the local economy, are actively looking for ways to keep the Russians in the region.

The Russian government, faced with a difficult social and economic situation, is *de facto* dissuading the Russians from coming back. While there is little doubt that an influx of even a few million would place great strain on Russian resources, some observers have concluded that Moscow's hidden agenda is to retain a Russian presence in the republic as a fifth column. As a Russian from Tajikistan angrily stated: "It's not just that Russia can't take us in, it doesn't want to. It's not just a matter of economic difficulties. Above all, it's a political problem. It's advantageous for Russia to keep us in the republics in the role of hostages."

Still, it is a fact that only a small percentage of the Russian population of the republics wants to leave. Most of the Russians have been living in the republics for more than 10 years, have married and are raising their children there. If the best interests of the Russian communities are to be taken into account, those who want to leave must be allowed and helped to do so. At the same time, those who want to stay must be encouraged and assisted in the process of integration. To be successful, this will require a change in attitude as well as policy by both Russia and the republics.

Claire Messina
Coordinator, CIS & Baltic states
International Organization for Migration

Crimean Tatar at Churkurcha, on the outskirts of Simferopol.

Crimea:

Bitter legacy of banishment

They are a young family, although the mother and father look older than their years. Their young son, Ismail plays fitfully with his rusty bike, but never smiles. Their home for the past several months has been a metal cargo container in a field in Churkurcha in the outskirts of Simferopol, the leading city in Crimea. They are a family of Crimean Tatars who returned three years ago from Uzbekistan to their ancestral home. But they were evicted from the first place they encamped, and they are now squatters in a flood plain populated mainly by grazing cows and dotted with half-built stone houses.

The Crimean Tatars are a deported people. In 1944, the entire Crimean Tatar nation – upwards of 250,000 to 350,000 people – were deported by Stalin to Central Asia, allegedly for collaboration with the Nazis. Many perished in the exercise. In 1988, after more than 30 years of agitation, permission was given to the Tatars to return. While the repatriation began slowly, the pace has quickened as Ukraine, the nation in which Crimea is now located, became independent in 1991. Upwards of 280,000 Tatars are now estimated to have returned, and a similar number are expected to repatriate over the remainder of this decade.

Upon return to Crimea, the Tatars found their homes and lands occupied. Some resorted to seizing lands which they then homesteaded; sporadic conflicts with local authorities have resulted. At the political level, this tension resonates with a simmering dispute in Ukraine about the status of Crimea, given to the Ukrainian republic by Khrushchev in 1954 as "a gift from the Russian people." In general, the population of Crimea, mostly ethnic Russians, now desires closer links with the Russian Federation, an outcome reflected in the recent presidential election. Elements of the population openly agitate for seccession.

There are many potential political fault lines in Ukraine, including disputes over scarce energy resources and the status of the Black Sea Fleet, but some believe that the treatment of repatriating Tatars could provide the spark that ignites a broader conflict between Russia and

Ukraine which could have monstrous consequences. The prevention of such a conflagration should be a first order priority of the international community.

In the effort to repatriate, Crimean Tatars face a panoply of obstacles, including difficulties in arranging inter-state transport of their personal property, exaction of prohibitive tariffs, and other measures that frustrate movement. Upon their arrival in Crimea, they find their homes have long since been destroyed or occupied. Many acquire new land and build new homes. Others of lesser means simply squat on unused land and build makeshift shelters, hoping for normal lives and lawful residence. The situation is unregulated and rife with uncertainty and potential for conflict.

In an effort to begin addressing the situation, and in recognition of the meager resources available from Ukraine because of the abysmal state of its economy, the Kiev office of the United Nations is preparing a prospective appeal to donor governments to support projects that will contribute to the maintenance of peace and stability in Crimea through development of infrastructure to absorb returning Tatars and other ethnic minorities. About $15 million would be sought from the international community to realize this initiative. Ongoing consultations are being held with potential donor governments to assess interest. While the concept is laudable, it will be crucial to ensure that the affected populations (including Crimean Tatars) participate as much as possible in the design and implementation of these rehabilitative projects. A development effort shaped by those immediately concerned would stand the best chance of success.

If anything, a focus by the U.N. solely on issues of absorption in Ukraine (Crimea) may be too limited. A broad multilateral approach involving the affected host governments, impacted transportation facilities, and the authorities in Ukraine, could better manage a movement that became international in character after the dissolution of the former Soviet Union. International institutions, including UNHCR, International Organization for Migration, and the United Nations Development Program, among others, should work together to promote international cooperation and facilitate the orderly movement of people in this sensitive context. Inter-agency consultation should be initiated immediately in order to organize a consolidated international appeal for funds to support a comprehensive approach.

The various international institutions concerned have a unique opportunity now to mediate between the affected governments in order to regulate this extended repatriation. The Crimean Tatars are not refugees in flight from persecution, but rather people who seek to return to their homeland after enduring mass expulsion and gross violations of their human rights. Of course, they are not the only people who have been punished by banishment in this region. Others include the Meshkhetian Turks, approximately 100,000 of whom now reside in Azerbaijan en route from Central Asia to Georgia; or the Volga Germans, the most numerous of the deported groups.

But there is potential now for effective solution-making which may prevent conflict, and which may establish an important precedent in the region. Effective redress could be provided to the Crimean Tatars, and the prospects for international cooperation and security could be enhanced. The basic objectives of ensuring justice and peace are surely among the most urgent tasks for the international community to address in the new world disorder.

ARTHUR C. HELTON

(Mr. Helton, a lawyer, directs Migration Programs at the Open Society Institute in New York. He recently led a mission of inquiry to Ukraine, including Crimea.)

This family is among tens of thousands of Meshkhetian Turks once banished to Uzbekistan, but who are now in Azerbaijan en route back to Georgia.

Asylum-seekers from Iraq at the Hardu detention center in Tallinn, Estonia.

Asylum-seekers in Estonia:

Tip of the iceberg

Hassan had a dream: flee Iraq, where his life was in danger, and make it to Sweden, via Moscow and Estonia.

But his dream ended in an Estonian prison in January 1994. Since then, his life has been a nightmare. "I didn't leave Saddam Hussein's hell to find myself in another hell," he says. "All I want is a place to live in peace and security. Instead, I'm treated as a criminal. I've done nothing wrong. My only crime is to have entered Estonia illegally, without a visa. Does that justify putting someone in jail?"

Hassan lives in Maardu prison, a few kilometers from Estonia's capital, Tallinn, with dozens of other Iraqi asylum-seekers as desperate as he is.

On 19 September, 85 asylum-seekers incarcerated in Estonia – in Maardu, Hardu and Parnu prisons – began a hunger strike to attract attention to their plight. By the end of October, 20 still refused to eat. Despair led one of Hassan's colleagues to stitch his lips together. For a time, even the 17 children detained in Hardu with their mothers refused any nourishment.

"We have no choice but to im-

prison these people", explained Juhan Parts, Vice-Chancellor of the Estonian Foreign Ministry. "It's the best way we have to dissuade refugee movements to our country."

Hassan's dream is a nightmare to the Baltic countries – especially Estonia, because of its proximity to Sweden and Finland.

The Baltic states fear becoming a transit zone between Russia and the Nordic countries for the thousands of asylum-seekers from the Third World who long to leave poor living conditions in Moscow and elsewhere in Russia. Though there has been some progress, borders in this part of the world remain porous, and some frontier officials are susceptible to corruption. Moreover, asylum-seekers are easy prey for unscrupulous human smugglers.

The two other Baltic countries – Lithuania and Latvia – have no refugee policy. Refugees are not jailed, as in Estonia, but they are marginalized. No aid is allotted them, and most struggle to get to the Nordic countries.

Salma is 32 years old. Of Kurdish origin, she lived in Baghdad before she fled with her 53-year-old mother, leaving behind her father, brothers and sisters. They first went to Jordan, then flew to Russia. "I wanted to go to Moscow, because I knew it was the best way to get to Scandinavia," said Salma. "It was easy to get a visa in a travel agency in Amman."

"But I couldn't stay in Moscow: it was too expensive and too dangerous," Salma continued. "The Mafia even broke into the apartment we were living in one day and demanded money. Fortunately, they didn't find anything. But I was so afraid I decided to leave." Salma and her mother got on a train to Tallinn, via Riga, in Latvia. "We didn't have a visa," she said. "We gave $200 to the conductor so he'd close his eyes and let us through."

They arrived in Tallinn on 3 August 1993 and contacted an Iraqi resident in Sweden who promised to transport them there for $2,500 each. But the smuggler left with the money, and they never saw him again. "The police arrested us on 26 August with about 50 other Iraqis, and took us to Maardu," Salma explained. It isn't easy disappearing into a crowd of blond Estonians when your hair is black and curly and your skin is dark. "In the beginning, we were together," Salma continued. But last April other asylum-seekers arrived in Estonia, and families were separated.

"The housing, the food, the health-care, aren't good," said Salma. "But they're probably no worse than for most Estonians. It's the uncertainty and the absence of freedom that are intolerable."

Like the other Baltic countries, Estonia has not acceded to the 1951 Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. Asylum-seekers are considered illegal immigrants, and treated as such. They risk the legal penalties: two months' imprisonment, indefinitely renewable.

> "We have no choice but to imprison these people. It's the best way we have to dissuade refugee movements to our country."

For now, the Estonian government has no intention of acceding to the Convention, or of drawing up a national law on refugees. "If we did, it would attract other refugees," Parts said. "The simplest solution would be to send them back where they come from: Russia. But we can't. They have no identity papers and Russia won't accept them without proof that they came through Russian territory."

How can a country which itself has complained of human rights abuses while under Soviet occupation justify such an attitude? "There's no reason to keep these people in prison," Parts conceded. "But given our economic difficulties, we don't have a choice."

Three years after independence, Estonia's economic situation is lackluster. Decades of Soviet occupation transformed this rural country into an industrialized state, with factories now so out-dated that some which once employed 13,000 workers now give work to only 4,000. "Raw materials and energy that the USSR once delivered free disappeared overnight – along with the Soviet market – when the Soviet empire was dismantled," explained Jan Wahlberg, Tallinn representative of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

Salaries are low: $150 a month, on average. Retirees lost their savings when the ruble was replaced by the Estonian crown; pensions are now $30 a month. Unemployment is almost 10 percent, and rising. That rate "would not be catastrophic in a Western country, where the unemployed are looked after by a welfare system," noted Wahlberg. "But in Estonia that system hardly exists. Benefits are so low that most of the ▶

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▶ unemployed don't even bother to register."

Estonia will need 15 years to attain the living standard of, say, Portugal. "In the 1930s, the Estonian economy was on a par with Finland," Wahlberg said. "In other words, if Estonia had benefited from the same opportunities for development as Finland, it would have the same quality of life today."

Nonetheless, Estonia's economy is still in better shape than Russia's and that of other Baltic countries: hence its drawing-power.

Estonia "has a very conservative monetary policy," said Wahlberg. "There is no budget deficit. The economy is relatively stable. The Swedes are the biggest investors, followed by Finns, Russians, Germans and Canadians. The proximity of Finland, where Estonia has linguistic and cultural ties, is decisive. Estonia has the means to improve its living standards. But it will take time."

With a population composed of one-third Russians – who arrived in two successive waves, under Stalin and under Brezhnev, and who have no intention of leaving Estonia – the Estonian government considers the problem of asylum-seekers a minor issue in comparison with the influence of ethnic Russians.

"We understand the economic and social problems that Estonia is going through," said Hans Thoolen, UNHCR regional representative for the Nordic countries. "But this policy of dissuasion by detention is intolerable. It is morally unacceptable to imprison asylum-seekers because they have crossed a border illegally.

Nearly 400 Kurds arrived on the Swedish island of Gotland in early 1993 after seven days at sea aboard an Estonian fishing boat.

And in any case, in the long term, this policy just doesn't work. When there is even the slightest chance of resettlement in Western countries, you are going to get an influx."

Still, Thoolen feels it would be unrealistic to demand that Estonia ratify the 1951 Convention now. "It would be a good thing, but it isn't a strategic priority for us," he said. "It would take too much time – Parliament has so many laws to pass – and we need action now. In addition, the example of Russia, which has ratified the Convention and which still mistreats refugees, proves that a signature doesn't solve all the problems."

Resettle the asylum-seekers in the Nordic countries? That's what Salma would like. "There are so few of us," she said. "Why don't they come get us?"

Indeed, there has been strong pressure from the Finnish public and non-governmental organizations, arguing that Finland should accept Estonia's asylum-seekers.

Such a policy "would constitute a pull factor, and the situation could get out of hand quickly," explained Esko Kiuru, who deals with refugee issues at the Finnish Foreign Ministry. "The Estonian question is the tip of an iceberg that's a huge international issue. We cannot let these people hope that they can buy their future with money. We could find ourselves dealing with the thousands of refugees in Moscow. It's Russia's duty to treat its refugees decently."

The Nordic countries have been applying pressure to that end. "The Finnish port authorities help the Estonians," Kiuru said. "There is some improvement. But it's far from perfect. We also help the Russian authorities improve their border service. St. Petersburg also has lots of Third World refugees who would leap at the opportunity to buy a ticket to the West."

Despite its firm policy, Finland did finally propose to take in these asylum-seekers – so long as UNHCR makes an official request, and if Estonia agrees. Estonia has still not agreed.

Some asylum-seekers have been luckier than Salma and Hassan: they managed to cross the Baltic Sea, often risking their lives. Last winter, 60 asylum-seekers locked in a container on a ferry between Tallinn and Stockholm almost died. A worker in the ship's hold heard muffled sounds coming from the container, and rescued them; a few hours more, and they would have suffocated. Last September, 128 asylum-seekers from Riga arrived in Sweden as stowaways on boats. It was the twelfth "boat-people" vessel to make the journey in two years.

For some, the risk is worth taking. They know that no Nordic country will send them back to the Baltic states, where there is no system to receive asylum-seekers and where, in Estonia's case, they can even be imprisoned.

UNHCR has proposed a way out of this morass. Get the asylum-seekers out of jail. Install them in a decent residency center, with the help of the Nordic countries. And give UNHCR access to them for status determination.

"We are eager to help, and so are the Nordic countries," explained Thoolen. "But no one will be able to as long as these people are in jail and their status remains unclear."

"The difficulty is persuading the Baltic governments that opening a center won't attract a crowd of new asylum-seekers," Thoolen continued. "On the contrary, the message will be clear. Only those who have been determined to be refugees will be able to stay in Estonia; the others will have to be sent back. The attraction of Baltic states as a final destination will be weaker than it is now, when they are considered a transit point for the Nordic countries. They will be a lot less attractive the day asylum-seekers have to look on them as a final destination."

"We can give them the example of Poland," Thoolen added. "Poland has a living standard comparable to Estonia's, and it ceased to become a transit zone for Germany the day it adopted regulations on refugees that allowed Germany to send illegal immigrants back."

Negotiations continue. UNHCR, the Nordic countries and the Estonian government have met several times to try to hammer out a solution to the problem of the detained asylum-seekers.

Some progress was accomplished concerning the treatment of detainees following a meeting in Tallinn October 19. Medical services and food will be improved. Some detainees will be able to reunite with their families in Hardu.

But the UNHCR regional bureau in Stockholm was somewhat disappointed to observe that promises concerning the detention of asylum-seekers that the Prime Minister had made one month before had received no follow-up.

Negotiations continue, for the clock is ticking. The asylum-seekers are determined. "If it was just a question of money, we would go back to Iraq," says Salma. "We'd have an apartment, a job, a salary. But we would never be safe. All we want is a bit of land to live in peace, like human beings. When the Estonian guard shoved my mother because she wanted to leave, because she was suffocating in that center – she couldn't take any more, she just wanted to breathe the air by the lakeside – then I felt I was no longer a human being".

CHRISTIANE BERTHIAUME

"If it was just a question of money, we would go back to Iraq. We'd have an apartment, a job, a salary. But we would never be safe."

Conflict in the Caucasus

The collapse of communism and the rise of ethnic strife have plunged the southern fringes of the former Soviet Union into turmoil, particularly in the Caucasus where some 1.5 million people have been forced from their homes in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Although there has been sporadic media coverage of the fighting over the past few years, the world is largely unaware of the human suffering that has followed for hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced people in all three republics.

At government invitation, UNHCR established offices in both Armenia and Azerbaijan in December 1992, marking the organization's first-ever assistance program for refugees and displaced people in the former Soviet Union. UNHCR began operations in Georgia in July 1993.

In addition to its traditional legal and protection mandate, UNHCR's mission in all three republics is to provide humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable of the refugees and displaced – some 630,000 people in total.

But the refugees and displaced aren't the only ones who are hurting. The general populations of all three countries are also bearing a tremendous burden. The infrastructure is collapsing, and in many areas of the Caucasus fuel and power supplies are sporadic or nonexistent. Trade and industry have ground to a halt, leaving hundreds of thousands of families without jobs or income. Inflation has skyrocketed and there are shortages of just about everything. People are hungry, and the lines for government-subsidized bread grow longer by the day. In Armenia, a half-kilo of butter costs a month's wages; a kilogram of meat, two months' pay.

UNHCR asked the international community for nearly $27 million for its 1994 programs in the three Caucasian countries, part of a total U.N. consolidated appeal for the region of more than $114 million.

GEORGIA: At least 350,000 people have been displaced by ethnic conflict on two fronts in Georgia, a country of 5.5 million people that was once one of the most prosperous of all former Soviet republics.

The first conflict began in November 1989 between the government and separatists in the South Ossetia region of northern Georgia. The second – and largest – conflict erupted in August 1992 between the government and separatists in the Abkhazia region of northwest Georgia.

Refugees and displaced aren't the only ones who are hurting. The general populations of all three countries are also bearing a tremendous burden.

UNHCR / K. Gosses

An anti-Georgian demonstration by Abkhaz residents of the Black Sea port of Sukhumi. The demonstrators were protesting the proposed return of displaced Georgians.

The displacements have occurred in several successive waves. Up to 350,000 of Abkhazia's estimated population of 540,000 fled the region between August 1992 and October 1993. Most of them, about 270,000 people, went to other areas of Georgia, while the remainder fled to the Russian Federation, Armenia, Greece and other countries. The majority of those fleeing were Georgians, who comprised 47 percent of the population of Abkhazia before the fighting – the largest single ethnic group. Abkhaz constituted only about 18 percent of the pre-war population, but today control Abkhazia. Other sizeable ethnic groups included Armenians (18 percent) and Russians (about 13 percent).

In South Ossetia, about 16,000 people fled the ethnic fighting to other parts of Georgia, while anoth-

Thousands of Georgians displaced by fighting in October 1993 were forced to flee on foot over the 2,780-meter Chuberi Pass, shown here in the bitter cold of dawn.

er 10,000 went to the neighboring North Ossetia region of Russia. In addition, at least 20,000 people have been displaced within South Ossetia itself. The fighting also affected some 100,000 Ossetians living in Georgia proper. South Ossetian authorities estimate that as many as 60,000 Ossets fled Georgia, most of them to Russia.

UNHCR has focused on assistance to 150,000 of the most vulnerable internally displaced people from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It has provided hundreds of tons of clothing, shoes, blankets, kitchen sets, soap, detergent, food and heating stoves to the displaced population, and is expanding a program to rehabilitate accommodation centers throughout the country.

Valeri Vashakidze, head of the Georgia State Committee for Refugees and Accommodation, estimates that at least 60 percent of all aid going to refugees and the displaced in Georgia comes from UNHCR and other international sources.

Of the more than 250,000 displaced people currently in Georgia, approximately 70 percent are living with host families, many of whom are finding it increasingly difficult to support them. The rest are housed in schools, hotels, sanatoriums, hospitals and other public buildings.

The effect of this influx on local populations, already reeling under severe economic pressures, has been dramatic. The population of the central town of Senake, for example, rose from 20,000 to 40,000 following the influx of displaced, while the regional center of Zugdidi swelled from 80,000 to 154,000 people.

The state social security network, which formerly provided assistance to some 1.5 million people, has virtually collapsed. The national currency, the coupon, has depreciated several thousand percent since it was introduced in September 1993.

"When we talk about assistance, we don't mean only for the displaced people," said Dr. Nino Uznadze, head of Georgia's International Humanitarian Aid Commission. "Host families and many in the general population also need help."

To meet the needs of the most vulnerable refugees and displaced, UNHCR initially appealed for $14.4 million for its 1994 programs in Georgia, part of an overall U.N. humanitarian budget of more than $40 million for the country. UNHCR later reduced its component to $7.4 million. As of late October, $6 million had been received.

Despite the many problems, there are some signs of hope. UNHCR, the Russian Federation, Georgia and Abkhaz authorities signed a Quadripartite Agreement on 4 April 1994 paving the way for the return of refugees and displaced people to their homes in Abkhazia. The parties agreed that the return should begin in the Gali district of Abkhazia, where the level of damage is much less and the security situation better than in most other parts of the war-ravaged region. The return began in October, but progress has been slow because of a number of unresolved political ▶

▶ issues between the Abkhaz and Georgians.

An estimated 80,000 people – most of them Georgians – fled the Gali district for other parts of Georgia. The current return plan assumes that some 40,000 of them will return to the Gali district. Some of the returnees are expected to come from the Russian Federation and other adjoining republics as well. Many of the returnees require some form of assistance from UNHCR – food, temporary shelter, household supplies, reconstruction materials.

At least 80 percent of homes in the Gali district were looted and stripped of every removable item, including doors, windows and electrical and plumbing fixtures. However, most of the homes are structurally sound and can be repaired.

Land mines have been scattered indiscriminately by the warring sides, particularly along the Inguri River in Gali district. These weapons, many of which are hidden in tea plantations and farm fields, pose a major threat to returnees as well as to those who remain in the region. UNHCR, in coordination with the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, was to begin a mine-awareness campaign in November.

Mobile UNHCR field teams are closely monitoring the return and reintegration process, working with local authorities, CIS peace-keeping forces and other humanitarian agencies.

ARMENIA & AZERBAIJAN: The six-year war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh has left thousands dead, tens of thousands wounded and driven more than 1 million people from their homes. In addition, the economies of both countries are in ruins and hundreds of thousands of people are without jobs or incomes.

Initially established as a six-month, $6.4 million emergency operation for both countries, the UNHCR programs in Armenia and Azerbaijan are now in their second year and have a combined 1994 budget of $12.5 million.

As 1994 drew to a close, a fragile cease-fire remained in place in what has become the longest-running conflict on the territory of the former Soviet Union. But there was still no immediate prospect that the hundreds of thousands of people displaced by the fighting would be able to go home anytime soon.

In addition to six years of war, Armenia is staggering under the effects of a *de facto* blockade by its neighbors that has at times blocked nearly all trade routes into the country, leaving it desperately short of food, fuel, seeds, fertilizer and other essentials. With the collapse of the former Soviet Union, government and regional administrative networks have disintegrated. What's left of the economy is a mixture of socialist, market and barter systems, underlaid with what locals call a strong "mafia" influence. More than 70 percent of the country's former industries have shut down, and those that remain open are operating at only 10 to 20 percent of capacity. The Armenian currency, the dram, was valued at 14.5 per U.S. dollar when it was introduced on 22 November 1993. By June 1994, it had depreciated to 400 per dollar. During the same period, prices increased 23-fold.

The Armenian government estimates that 94 percent of the population of 3.5 million people live below the World Bank poverty line of $1 per person per day. And the government is still trying to cope with the aftermath of the 1988 Armenian earthquake that devastated much of the country, killed 25,000 people and left 500,000 people homeless.

On top of these huge problems is a refugee population of more than 300,000 people who fled Nagorno-Karabakh and other areas in Azerbaijan in a series of outflows between 1988 and 1992.

As 1994 drew to a close, a fragile cease-fire remained in place in what has beome the longest-running conflict on the territory of the former Soviet Union.

UNHCR in 1994 assisted a "most vulnerable" caseload of 180,000 of these refugees. But as the above examples illustrate, nearly the entire population of Armenia is now vulnerable.

"Despite the hardships faced by the general population, the Armenian people have been extremely generous to the refugees. They feel a lot of sympathy for them," said Robert Robinson, UNHCR's head of office in Yerevan. "Armenians don't let each other starve. They share what they've got."

But that generosity may not last if things get much worse for the general population, particularly with the onset of another bitterly cold winter. "When you're sleeping in a room that's minus 10 degrees centigrade, you're on the ninth floor with no elevator, you have no electricity 24 hours a day and you have little food or fuel, it takes a huge psychological toll," Robinson said. "I think as each winter comes, the amount of energy that people have to cope becomes less and less."

UNHCR has increased its caseload of most vulnerable refugees in Armenia from 53,000 when it opened its office in December 1992, to 140,000 in 1993, to 180,000 in 1994.

In 1993, UNHCR delivered a total of 105,000 family food parcels, along with blankets, plastic sheeting and kerosene as part of a wider distribution by USAID (co-financed by Japan) to the general population. It also supported a variety of programs by NGOs, including an innovative rural shelter project that provides so-called "container housing" and 800-square-meter plots of land to refugees so they can grow some of their own food.

Although the government has registered about 340,000 refugees, some 35,000 are believed to have

returned to Nagorno-Karabakh and thousands more have gone to other countries – mostly within the former Soviet Union – because of the poor economic conditions in Armenia. It is estimated that about 300,000 refugees who fled from Azerbaijan remain in Armenia. The government says a further 72,000 people are displaced from towns and villages bordering Azerbaijan in the east. There are also an estimated 5,000-6,000 refugees who fled fighting in the Abkhazia region of Georgia.

About 60 percent of refugees in Armenia live in communal centers, many of which urgently require repair and rehabilitation.

UNHCR's funding requirements for Armenia in 1994 were $4,005,700 to provide multi-sectoral assistance to refugees and internally displaced people.

In Azerbaijan, UNHCR has seen the number of refugees and displaced people in the country swell from less than 500,000 in December 1992 when it opened its office in the capital, Baku, to some 900,000 today. Between 10 and 15 percent of Azerbaijan's population are now refugees or displaced, placing a huge strain on society and the government.

Although UNHCR's involvement in Azerbaijan initially began as a six-month program, the Kelbajar emergency of April 1993 underscored the need for continuing emergency assistance as well as aid to previous arrivals. In 1993, fighting sparked at least five consecutive waves of displacement, prompting extension of the program. UNHCR's support for 1994 included provision of basic essentials and other urgently needed assistance for refugees and displaced in the areas of health, water and sanitation.

UNHCR has provided tens of thousands of tons of humanitarian supplies to Azerbaijan since late 1992.

The refugee population is composed of 228,840 Azeris who fled Armenia, mostly in 1988. There are also some 50,000 Meshkhetian Turks who fled from Uzbekistan in 1989, a movement not connected to the war over Nagorno-Karabakh. Internally displaced Azerbaijanis number at least 630,000.

The number of UNHCR beneficiaries – those considered most vulnerable and in need of assistance – has increased from 53,000 when the program was established in December 1992, to 300,000 in 1994.

Some 42 percent of the beneficiary population are children under 15 years of age, 31 percent are women and 15 percent are elderly.

Most of the displaced are from rural areas and the majority now live with host families and in public buildings that have been turned into communal shelters. However, there has been near-total saturation of public buildings, including schools. As a result, by mid-1994 at least 60,000 displaced people were living in tent camps and settlements, many of which sprang up spontaneously along roadsides near the front lines following the latest fighting in mid-1993. UNHCR has begun a program to provide tent schools to the displaced population.

UNHCR's funding requirements for Azerbaijan in 1994 totaled $8.5 million, all of which was met.

Ron Redmond

Azerbaijanis mourning war dead near the town of Yevlakh, Azerbaijan.

Tajikistan:

Rebuilding Socialism

In Tajikistan, new roofs are sprouting at a bewildering speed in Socialism, the largest of four villages in a collective farm, or *kholkoz*, called Communism. In late 1992, the majority of Socialism's neat mud brick houses were reduced to smoldering ruins. Dozens of other villages in Tajikistan's south-western province of Khatlon were either partially or totally abandoned and destroyed. In some towns and villages the destruction was more selective: a house here, two houses there – a tell-tale sign of specific targeting of certain ethnic or social groups.

Although there was an ethnic element, Tajikistan has a sizeable Uzbek and smaller Russian, Kyrgyz and Tatar minorities), the conflict was fought mainly on geographically based clan lines. The principal victims were Tajiks living in the southwest who originated from the mountainous northern and eastern regions of Garm and Pamir. Between 20,000 and 40,000 people were killed during the civil war, which began in May 1992 nine months after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

More than half a million were displaced inside the country and, over a period of several weeks beginning in December 1992, 60,000 refugees fled across the icy waters of the Amu river to Afghanistan. In addition, an estimated 50,000 Tajiks of Uzbek origin left for Uzbekistan, at least 5,000 refugees of Kyrgyz origin sought safety in Kyrgyzstan and as many as 20,000 Tajiks of Turkman origin are believed to have integrated locally in Turkmenistan. During the civil war, an unknown number of Tajiks also left for Ukraine, Russia and other CIS countries.

"There were about 750 Garmi houses in this village," says Zo'eer Mahmad Uloyev, a 32-year-old returnee who has been appointed the UNHCR volunteer in Socialism. "Only two were not destroyed, because they belonged to mixed [Uzbek-Garmi] couples. During the fighting about 70 people disappeared. We know for a fact that 12 old men who stayed behind were killed. Other people were caught on the road..."

During the Soviet era, the Central Asian republics were more or less closed to the outside world. At the beginning of 1993, Tajikistan was new territory to UNHCR as well as to most of the rest of the international community.

In December 1992, while UNHCR was busy coping with the Tajik refugees arriving in northern Afghanistan, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) became the first international humanitarian agency to set up an operation inside Tajikistan itself, providing medical assistance to the war-wounded and relief for the internally displaced (IDPs). UNHCR began its Tajikistan operation a month later, followed by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF-Belgium, France and Holland). For the next two years, because of a drastic shortage of other partners willing to launch significant programs in Tajikistan, these agencies, along with the World Food Program (WFP), between them bore almost the entire burden of protection, assistance and initial rehabilitation for the IDPs and returning refugees, as well as making a substantial contribution to the wider peace process.

UNHCR's involvement inside the country of origin from the outset, with a primary motive of smoothing the path for early repatriation, is only one of several unusual characteristics of the Tajikistan operation. Another notable feature has been a strong human rights monitoring role, played out at both local and central government levels, which has complemented UNHCR's traditional

UNHCR R. Cerne

Returnee children attend a village school near Shaartuz. In winter, their desks will be covered in snow. A shortage of funds and active rehabilitation and development agencies is helping to prolong the hardship in Tajikistan.

protection role for returning refugees. These activities, coupled with considerable cooperation on the part of the government and some local authorities, are generally perceived to have resulted in increased stability and reconciliation in some of the most severely devastated areas in Khatlon – benefiting returning refugees and IDPs alike.

The establishment of conditions sufficiently safe for organized repatriations to take place as soon as possible from Afghanistan – scarcely a safe asylum country – was far from easy. Amra Nuhbegovic, a Bosnian, is a member of the UNHCR mobile field team that covers the Kabodian and Shaartuz districts – the worst-hit area during the civil war. "I arrived in the country in July 1993," she recalls. "During my first field trip to Kabodian, four returnees were murdered. The next time I went to the area, three people were shot and wounded in Shaartuz district. However, we haven't had a murder here since September 1993. The cooperation of the local authorities, police and KGB has improved enormously in Shaartuz and Kabodian. Now, they even react before we hear about an incident, whereas in the early days, UNHCR had to apply a lot of pressure for them to take any action."

Returnees, whether IDPs or refugees, originally faced three types of threat: attacks by local inhabitants who had helped force them out, or who had profited from their absence by taking over their land or occupying their houses; attacks by marauding gangs of bandits exploiting the vacuum of law and order in the immediate aftermath of the civil war; and attacks by the very people who were supposed to be providing the law and order.

While the central government has in general been extremely cooperative in all matters concerning the safety of returnees, the improved situation also owes a lot to a number of dedicated local officials, including Abdulaev Aslanov, the head of Khatlon's Immigration Department, KGB officials in Kumsanghir district and the current chiefs of police and prosecutors in Shaartuz and Kabodian.

"Since I was appointed [illegible] ary 1993," says Faroukh Nassimov, Chief Prosecutor in Shaartuz, "I have had to deal with two or three cases involving returnees every day." He agrees that matters have improved considerably. "A year ago, everybody could discriminate against returnees, beat them, steal from them. Now it's much better."

Cases range from settling disputes about the ownership of a tractor to apprehending a vicious gang, allegedly headed by a man called Basaliev, who had established a reputation as a ruthless fighter during the civil war. Basaliev and his followers are accused of murdering at least eight people in 1993, all of them refugee or IDP returnees. On one occasion, according to reports received by UNHCR, a couple and their two children were kidnapped by the gang and taken up into the mountains, where the children and their mother were killed one by one in front of the father. The father was then shot after managing to untie himself and setting fire to the house in which he was being held prisoner. On another occasion, two return- ▶

▶ ee women were reported missing by UNHCR. It turned out that they had been taken by the same group, raped, sexually assaulted, tortured with cigarettes and decapitated. Finally, in September 1993, UNHCR reported that two young men had gone missing.

When two gang members were captured in December 1993, they confessed to murdering the two missing men. Three more people, including Basaliev, who had been on the run since December, were arrested in May 1994. In June, Chief Prosecutor Nassimov presented the case before the court of first instance and all five of the accused were convicted of murder. The case then passed on to the regional court where, unless the verdicts are overturned, sentence will be passed.

Nowadays, most of the cases coming before Nassimov are more routine. Refugees and IDPs in Tajikistan, as in many other countries around the world, often return home to find other people living in their houses. UNHCR frequently brings cases concerning occupied houses to the attention of the authorities. On 6 October, a UNHCR volunteer – one of whom is appointed in each village containing a sizeable number of returnees – came to the UNHCR field office in Shaartuz to report the 61th occupied-house case recorded by UNHCR in Shaartuz and Kabodian. Of these, 30 had by that date been successfully resolved, with the house returned to its original owner, a process made simpler by a special law concerning occupied houses that was passed by the Tajik Parliament at the beginning of 1993.

Associate Field Officer Amra Nuhbegovic immediately made a preliminary inspection herself and then reported the case to the police. Depending on whether or not the occupier voluntarily makes way for the original owners, who were due to return during the next organized repatriation from Afghanistan, the case may end up being decided by the chief prosecutor. A functioning and reliable legal system is vital to the protection of returnees, and in Shaartuz, Kabodian and some – but not all – of the returnee districts in Khatlon, the system is in general functioning well – despite the many security problems still occurring in the country at large. As Chief Prosecutor Nassimov puts it, "Freeing one occupied house or arresting a killer is worth much more than empty statements at grand meetings."

A functioning and reliable legal system is vital to the protection of refugees. But there are still many security problems occurring in the country at large.

One of the worst examples of harassment by supposed forces of law and order involved a rogue unit of troops that took up residence in the returnee transit center in Kabodian, along with a tank, and began threatening, robbing and beating up returnees and anyone else who happened to cross their path. After repeated protests to the local authorities had failed to dislodge them, UNHCR's chief of mission in Dushanbe, Pierre-François Pirlot, took up the matter with the central government and threatened to suspend organized repatriation to the area. As a result, the troops were finally removed.

According to Chief Prosecutor Nassimov, UNHCR's proactive human rights monitoring and protection roles have helped considerably in the battle to restore the rule of law in a shattered land: "UNHCR plays an important role. When UNHCR suggests the authorities do something, maybe we do it quicker than we would otherwise. When UNHCR brings a problem to our attention, it places us under an obligation to react. For example, in situations like the one involving the soldiers and the tank, I do not have the authority to resolve the problem."

In Socialism, which is in Kabodian district, Zo'eer Uloyev has had first-hand experience both of the early protection problems and the subsequent improvements. After fleeing to nearby mountains in late 1992, he and his family made their way to Dushanbe. On 19 March 1993, he was among the first group of displaced people to return home.

"There were about 500 of us. When we arrived at the railway station here, we were surrounded by a group of about 200 people armed with sticks and stones, who were trying to prevent us from returning to our homes." An ugly stand-off ensued, with UNHCR, the U.N. Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the ICRC playing a vital role in ensuring that the local authorities did their utmost to resolve the situation. However, despite a protective cordon provided by the local militia, the incident ended in tragedy. "Although the militia defended us, and nobody was killed or beaten, we had to spend eight days in the station, and 16 people – mainly children – died of cold or hunger."

Once Zo'eer and the others had finally escaped from the station and returned to their gutted houses, there were still incidents when returnees' tents were stoned or burned. The worst such incident took place on 26 February 1994, when a dispute over land between the Uzbek and returnee Garmi communities in Socialism turned into a running battle involving over 100 people. The police arrived in force and managed to stop the fighting, but not before eight people were so seriously injured they had to be taken to hospital. UNHCR staff were present at the scene, helped tend the injured and played a major role in the ensuing attempts to promote reconciliation between the two groups.

Socialism was placed under a curfew for a week and the police carried out a lengthy and thorough investigation. "The authorities really supported us," says Zo'eer. "Since then they have arranged meetings virtually every day. Both groups are invited to attend and are encouraged to talk to each other and air their grievances."

For many of the returnees, this incident felt like the final straw and initially many of them wanted to leave Socialism. "But when they saw that the authorities were coming every day, and now that UNHCR has given them building materials, they have decided to stay," says Zo'eer. "Now the atmosphere is much better than before. If an Uzbek is getting married, lots of Garmis attend the wedding, and vice versa."

In March 1993, a joint UNHCR/ICRC survey identified 17,000 destroyed houses in Khatlon province. Some were completely razed to the ground; others had lost their roofs, and had gaping holes in place of doors and windows. As part of its rehabilitation program, UNHCR decided to provide both the refugees repatriating from Afghanistan and returning IDPs with materials – wooden beams, roofing sheets, and nails – to rebuild their roofs.

Despite a constant shortfall in funding that has plagued the Tajikistan operation, and has contributed to serious delays in the rebuilding program, new roofs are starting to appear all over Khatlon.

In Socialism, more than 3,300 of the 3,500 people who fled had returned by late October, and Save the Children Fund (USA) is supervising a Food for Work (FFW) program, under which houses are reconstructed by 23 "brigades," each consisting of 12 or 13 men. Of a total of 640 destroyed houses in Socialism, 169 had already been rebuilt by the FFW brigades by 28 October. In all, it is hoped that 13,200 houses will be completed in Khatlon province by the end of 1994.

"In spite of everything that has happened," says Zo'eer, "I am an optimist. There is only one school in the village, and only one cemetery. These are shared by both groups. One of my father's neighbors gave back two [looted] TVs, a refrigerator and a sofa. Some of our neighbors were good like that. I think they felt ashamed."

Asked if he can envisage the day when a Garmi will marry an Uzbek in Socialism, Zo'eer pauses a long time. "That's a very difficult question," he says finally. After another long pause for thought, he smiles dryly and shakes his head. "No, I can't see a Garmi marrying an Uzbek in this village – not in the near future."

A lot has been achieved in a short time in Tajikistan, due to a number of factors: the cooperation of the government, and its desire to see a speedy repatriation; the desire of the refugees themselves to return from a dangerous situation in northern Afghanistan (where between 30 and 50 refugees have been killed in the cross-fire between different Afghan factions); the free flow of information about the situation inside Tajikistan from family and friends to the refugees, by means of a regular UNHCR-operated postal service between the two countries; and a well-run, dynamic program that incorporates many of the new ideas that have emerged in UNHCR over the past few years.

Nevertheless, many problems remain. In some areas, especially around Tyube, tensions are still running high and the local authorities appear not to care about the protection of returnees. Nevertheless, by the end of 1994 most of the refugees who wish to return from Afghanistan will have done so, with the rest likely to return in the spring of 1995. The roofing program should be completed shortly after the last refugees re- ▶

New roofs are sprouting all over war-ravaged parts of Tajikistan. Here, returnees rebuild their home in Shaartuz district.

UNHCR R. Gaston

▶ turn, and UNHCR will by then have started to phase down its program.

Although more NGOs, such as Relief International, the International Rescue Committee and Save the Children Fund (USA), started setting up substantive operations during the latter part of 1994, there are still far too few players committed to taking up the baton during the vital transition period between initial rehabilitation and longer term development. Tajikistan's economic situation is not far short of catastrophic. Its infrastructure is badly decayed, and the water, sanitation and health sectors are in chronic condition.

"What we have done can be ruined overnight if the economy continues to plummet and everything explodes," says Chief of Mission Pirlot. "People need employment. They need hope. It's a very volatile mixture. If they don't get hope, they'll explode again. They will have nothing to lose."

With the principal exceptions of the United States – which has strongly supported UNHCR's otherwise extremely under-funded program and provided some bilateral aid – and the Russian Federation, which has provided the majority of the peacekeeping troops patrolling the troublesome border with Afghanistan, the international community has so far largely ignored Tajikistan.

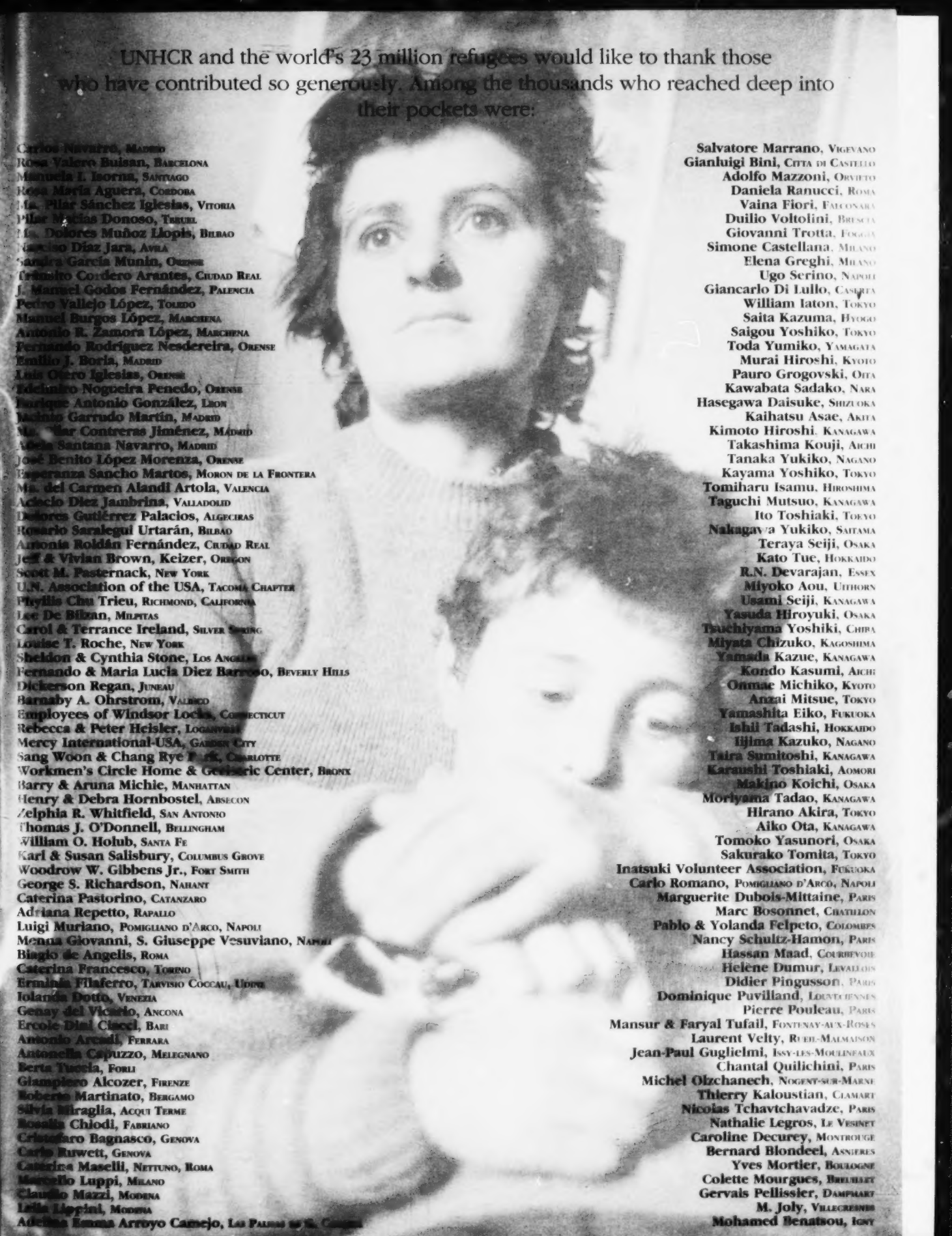
Despite the acute shortage of funds, UNHCR and its new NGO partners have launched a number of income-generating and Quick Impact Projects in an attempt to breathe some wisps of economic life into returnee communities. But the problems in Tajikistan are crying out for more attention. And so far, they have been resoundingly ignored by the world at large. If Tajikistan does slide back into chaos once again, this may appear in retrospect as a clear case of criminal neglect.

If, on the other hand, the momentum of reconstruction, reconciliation and development can be maintained and expanded, Tajikistan may recover from its crippling internal problems and bring some much-needed stability to Central Asia. Then one day a Garmi will perhaps, after all, marry an Uzbek in a small village called Socialism, in the *kholkoz* of Communism, in a little-known but exceptionally beautiful country called Tajikistan.

Rupert Colville

UNHCR P. Lorenzo

By the end of 1994, most of the refugees who wish to return from Afghanistan will have done so. Here, Tajiks return home by train from Afghanistan.



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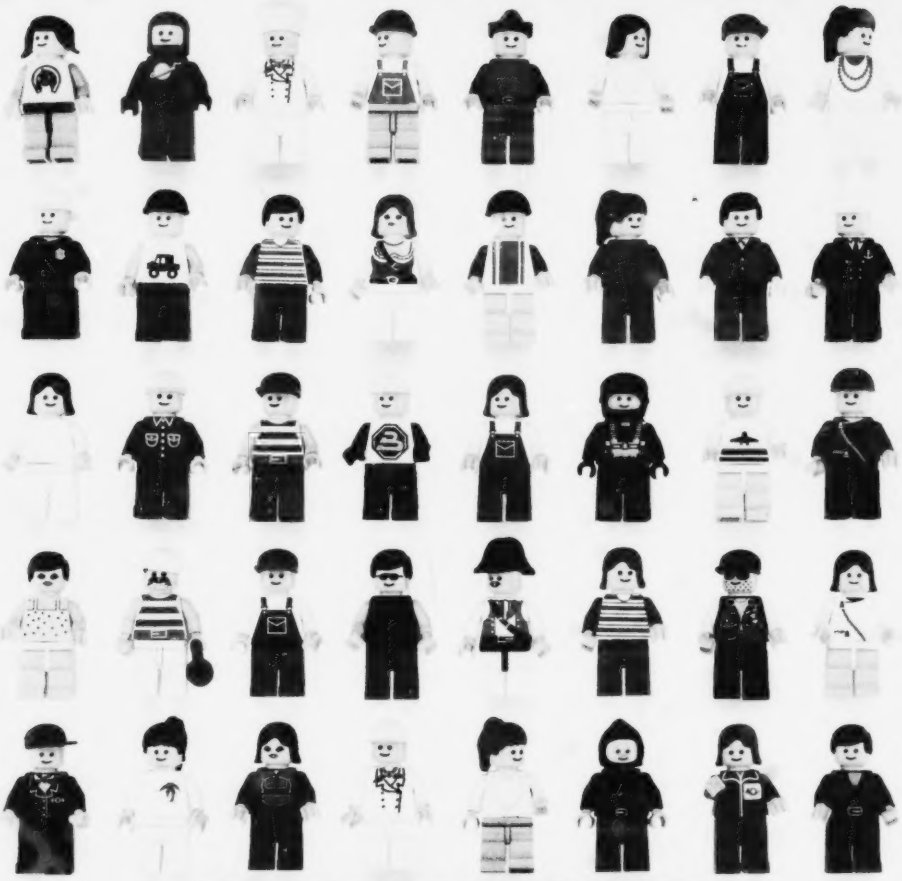
Karaushi Toshiaki, Aomori
Makino Koichi, Osaka
Moriyama Tadao, Kanagawa
Hirano Akira, Tokyo
Aiko Ota, Kanagawa
Tomoko Yasunori, Osaka
Sakurako Tomita, Tokyo
Inatsuki Volunteer Association, Fukuoka
Carlo Romano, Pomigliano d'Arco, Napoli
Marguerite Dubois-Mittaine, Paris
Marc Bosonnet, Chatillon
Pablo & Yolanda Felpeto, Colombes
Nancy Schultz-Hamon, Paris
Hassan Maad, Courbevoie
Helène Dumur, Levallois
Didier Pingusson, Paris
Dominique Puvilland, Louveciennes
Pierre Pouleau, Paris
Mansur & Faryal Tufail, Fontenay-aux-Roses
Laurent Velty, Rueil-Malmaison
Jean-Paul Guglielmi, Issy-les-Moulineaux
Chantal Quilichini, Paris
Michel Olzchanech, Nogent-sur-Marne
Thierry Kaloustian, Clamart
Nicolas Tchavtchavadze, Paris
Nathalie Legros, Le Vesinet
Caroline Decurey, Montrouge
Bernard Blondeel, Asnieres
Yves Mortier, Boulogne
Colette Mourgues, Brelidey
Gervais Pellissier, Dampmart
M. Joly, Villecresnes
Mohamed Benatsou, Igny



Models courtesy of The LEGO Group.

SPOT THE REFUGEE

There he is. Fourth row, second from the left. The one with the moustache. Obvious really.

Maybe not. The unsavoury-looking character you're looking at is more likely to be your average neighbourhood slob with a grubby vest and a weekend's stubble on his chin.

And the real refugee could just as easily be the clean-cut fellow on his left.

You see, refugees are just like you and me.

Except for one thing.

Everything they once had has been left behind. Home, family, possessions, all gone. They have nothing.

And nothing is all they'll ever have unless we all extend a helping hand.

We know you can't give them back the things that others have taken away.

We're not even asking for money (though every penny certainly helps).

But we are asking that you keep an open mind. And a smile of welcome.

It may not seem much. But to a refugee it can mean everything.

UNHCR is a strictly humanitarian organization funded only by voluntary contributions. Currently it is responsible for more than 23 million refugees around the world.

UNHCR

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UNHCR Public Information
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